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Some other god

by

Amalie Kwassman

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Debra Marquart, Major Professor
Laura Michael Brown
Loreto Prieto
Charissa Menefee

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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<i>The Penn Review</i>	“Apparently, God Can Get A Little Lonely”
<i>the minnesota review</i>	“If the darkness”
<i>Salt Hill</i>	“Purity”
<i>The Mud Season Review</i>	“Getting Close”
<i>Cosmonauts Avenue</i>	“Breathing”
<i>Ruminate</i>	“The Next Day There Were Birds”
<i>Hobart</i>	“Beard Trims in Heaven” & “The New Rules for a Brooklyn Neighborhood”
<i>Booth</i>	“Dear mom(or I hate to break it to you but the sky is a whore Too”
<i>The Ohio Edit</i>	“And We Left Him There Like That”
<i>Hyperallergic</i>	“Greasy Heaven” and “You Are The First Man”
<i>The Illanot Review</i>	“Unlearning”
<i>Punchnel’s</i>	“Box” and “Prayers for the Dead”
<i>Cutthroat: A Journal of the Arts</i>	“What We Do in The Next Life”
<i>Juked</i>	“Ghost”

ABSTRACT

Some Other God is a poetry collection that deals with the effects of mental illness, abuse, death, grief, financial struggles and tragedy on a Jewish community in Brooklyn, New York. The collection also discusses sexuality and coming of age in a religious community.

Section One

SOMEBODY GET ME A WINDOW

The knife sang in my memory
Sometimes we bow as a sign of respect
To the tools
The warnings
To The trembling
The shrieking
Sometimes our blood gets lazy.
Confused blankets with warmth
The living doesn't know how love is spelled
We memorize ourselves
How we looked when we were sold to our mothers
When we were wired like birds to sing only songs they welcomed
But sometimes we just need our own window to look out and see
our wings moving in morning sky's tongue
We can hold up our breaths and learn to speak again
Sometimes we can cook our own voices
Sometimes sunlight remembers our address
Sometimes our bodies are poisoned fireflies
We can't help but like the way we die
Sometimes our bodies make music with dead
Sometimes we can't save ourselves
Sometimes we do need to be saved.
We are just hanging there by the loose strings in our underwear

THE NEXT DAY THERE WERE BIRDS

Brother claims his head is not a body of water. There is no river on the left side of his brain. He claims he could still talk when they took him out the destroyed car. When they found him twisted around his dead father like an umbilical cord. He could enunciate words like *lamppost* and *freedom* and *el Salvador* and *salvation* and *garage*. He called sister an adverb, a word he used to modify everything. The doctors drained dying from his hips. Unlearned water from his tears. They said he wasn't crying even though brother rewound the sound of blood over and over again. Until despair looked like fruit. Looked like something he could eat. Well, choke on. Grow that despair into a shelf of skeleton. Hibernate that skeleton's fist in the back of her brother's throat. Let death come to him like this.

But the next day there were birds. Birds singing in the sewers. Brother is not rooting for the birds or the stars. He calls them those little yellow piss holes. Brother wants more scars. To crawl through the pipelines they put in heaven. On earth, he was becoming a burning mouth. Speaking through sprinklers in his head. Telling everyone, this was the second time he died. The first time it was seven years ago by the window with a cord around his neck. He started numbering his veins that day. Until yesterday, when the car slashed him to the hull. Sister is writing for his ghost. His shredded life. All the hours Brother spent measuring his eyes after. To see if they were still the same eyes.

THERE WAS THIS CHAIR

In every place, we ever lived in, we always had a chair. Most of the time, no-one ever sat in it. It was a recliner. The one we got after my grandmother died. It was made of all leather and given to her by her brother who didn't want his ex-wife to have it. It always felt like you had to do something special to sit in the chair. Anyone could sit on the couch. You could lounge around all day on the couch. But the chair. You had to do something wonderful to sit in it. Like wash all the windows or cook straight for three hours. I only sat in my grandmother's leather chair once when I was seven. When my grandmother came out of the kitchen, I jumped out of the chair. Braiding my dolls hair was not enough sweat.

A chair like that takes sweat to sit in. Sitting in that chair meant that you worked hard and now give permission for the world to be beautiful. You just want to sit there and acknowledge the curtains, the newspapers on the table, children's toys on the floor. You also had to have a certain kind of smile when you sat there. My grandmother had that certain kind of smile. After she finished cooking my grandfather super, she would come out in her rainbow housedress and sit there. The curls from her *sheitel* bouncing.

After my grandmother died, there was much talk of who would take the chair. Someone had to take the chair. We couldn't give the chair away. And my grandfather claimed he was too old to know what to do with a chair like that. So, it was only logical that my mother should get it. But now, no-one ever sat in. We knew we would not work hard enough or get the smile right. The way you were supposed to walk up to the chair, your body swaying slightly back and forth after a hard day's work. How you were supposed to look at the curtains first. Then the floor. We would do something out of order. Sometimes my father would say "Oh, look at this great chair!" and then proceed to sit on the couch.

THE NEW RULES FOR A BROOKLYN NEIGHBORHOOD

When they tore down
a family-owned store
to build a Chipotle
and you talked extra loud
in the street about all the extras
you put on your burrito
suddenly, it was okay to be seen
in my neighborhood.

When the orthodox Jewish family
with ten kids had to move out
to New Jersey, and a young couple
with one baby named “Brooklyn”
moved in, and you mentioned
to all your girlfriends
that the name “Brooklyn”
is making a comeback
suddenly, it was okay to be seen
in my neighborhood.

But I thought home was like
the word *water*. You would never
let go of it. When I walk on the street
in my part of Brooklyn, I step over
beer bottle glass and empty cans
of diet coke, lots of them,
because the kids are drinking
too early, and the Jewish women
are always trying to lose weight.

I want to be seen here.
when I walk by two Russian men
arguing with their shirts off
next to a busted car,
when I step over finished

chip bags on the street,
because one Russian man thought
the other Russian man busted his car
and the Jewish family with all the kids

eats chips to save money on snacks.
I want to be seen here.
I want to be seen here because I know
home is like the word *water*.
It runs down my throat
and I swallow all of it.

PICKLES

In Brooklyn, they always forget the pickles in the hamburgers. It's just the way it is. Some say they are being cheap, and others think that the cook just has more important things to think about than your pickle. In your hamburger. In other places outside of Brooklyn, they never forget the pickle in the hamburger. As a matter of fact, they give you two. Sometimes, three pickles if you are lucky.

Well, my father had a hard time asking where the pickle was in his hamburger. We went to this hole-in the wall squished in between a candy store and bakery for our schnitzel and burgers. The red paint was coming off the store sign and there were only two grape colored tables with two green chairs total inside. Sometimes, these tables were occupied by old, weary long-bearded Jewish men who ate quietly and then didn't throw out their sandwich wrappers.

My father wasn't one to ask them to throw out their wrappers either. He threw out their garbage himself and then with a large grin, pushed the two chairs together from each table and said to my brother and me, "Well, kiddos, take a seat." My brother and I sat on the grape colored chairs and waited for our burgers. Now, this wasn't the prettiest place around and who knows when they last had a health inspection, but their two tables were always full and there was a constant stream of men coming in for their burger.

My brother and I watched the procession of old Jewish men order almost the same thing. "A *bisel* potato salad. A *bisel*. And a burger." Almost every man just wanted a little potato salad and a burger. Every now and again, you would get a guy who really hung over the salad counter and almost tried to sniff the salads. Usually, this guy was younger and had three children and a wife in the car so he needed to know what everything was immediately. "Well, what is this. *Mazza*? Cabbage? Okay. Some cabbage. Farfel? Okay." The tired man behind the counter wrinkled his gray brows, nodded his head and piled the food in containers.

Finally, the burgers came. My father carried the tin-foil covered burgers proudly and offered them to us with a sweeping gesture. “Daddy! Daddy!” My brother and I grabbed for them and immediately start eating. However, my father stood with his burger, leaning over the table and inspecting it. “Oh, damn it! There’s no pickle!” My father slammed his fist down on the table.

“Well, daddy, you should ask,” I said with all my ten-year-old knowledge of what to do when you don’t have something. My father did not ask. He just stared at his burger with the bruise on his arm from the fight with Mom burning my eyes like a star.

APPARENTLY, GOD CAN GET A LITTLE LONELY

a rabbi joked once. He likes our praise,
 so often when I talk to God
 I talk about everything
 extra beautifully with lots of similes
 as if God were a bad poet.
 I tell Him that the rain He made
 sounds like angels singing against my door
 and flowers are like God's graffiti on earth.

And if that doesn't work
 we just talk about the weather
 and how my mother is doing.
 No mention of how I get slightly turned on
 by men and women in tight jeans on the subway.

I want to ask Him why
 my left breast is slightly smaller than the right
 and how I can stop feeling
 self-conscious about it.
 Also, why isn't there more
 comfortable woman's underwear?

I want to ask where He thinks
 my dead father is. Is he somewhere
 along the skyline and I can't see him
 because the buildings in New York are too tall?
 Or is he cramped inside a coffin, plenty
 of time now to consume *Reader's Digest*?
 I want to beg Him not to let me die yet.
 To plead that no one shoots up the subway
 or the movie theater tonight. And I wish
 He would breathe a promise into my bones
 that we will always have each other to talk to,
 that neither one of us will ever be alone.

MOMMA FLIPS THROUGH THE PHONEBOOK TO FIND ME A HUSBAND

and stops on a name with her longest red fingernail
digging her finger into the page like the edge of a shovel
ready to scoop and display

Yitzi Sheilbaum

the name is shiny
the clink of a new jewel
that you can still bother the sea to come out of it
her eyes scroll across the page
cranes her neck to see
another half-eaten sun in the mouth of a mountain almost in view

Issac Glassberg

maybe he has that wide smile and a bright red tie
and he eats all his meals standing up
so he can get to the synagogue faster
and she circles and crosses names out
this man is too close to the neighborhood
that man sounds like he wears a toupee

like picking up scattered bits of gold

and dropping them back in

SOUP KITCHEN LOVE POEM

He knew
when he was in love.
And apparently, it was with me.

The boy in the soup kitchen
gave me his extra pickles, broke his rye bread in half,
said I could have his pineapple.

He winked at me from behind his 18-year old face splattered in pea soup.
Got up whenever I got up to use the bathroom
to talk to me in line.

He told me he was getting a car soon and applying to college.
Either way, he must have learned
somewhere
about when you know
you are in love.

I never knew
which guy was the one to break
the rye bread in half for
or give my pineapple chunks to.

What was I looking for?
Who would I get up for and talk to in the bathroom line even
though I did not
have to go?

I gave him my number
because I wanted to learn
how he knew what to look for.

I thought love lived
underneath the ocean.
And every so often
people put on their best
diving gear and went to look for it.

Previously, love had come to me
like a cold sore on my lip
or a suddenly twisted ankle
Pain suddenly occurring with broken promises and people who weren't there

but him
Somebody must have taught him
Let them have the last pineapple.

ON MESSES

Even politicians
do it and famous people
who have three small dogs
each with their own small
sweater do it. We are only
imagining
better things everybody does it.
We walked
to the bakery to buy
a big cookie to share.
And my father
said sharing the cookie was like
we were eating
up bits of the moon.
And I asked if the moon
was really that
fluffy and condensed
into such a sugary
powdery mess?
And of course, my father said no.
But we are only imagining
better things
and everybody does it.
So, we imagine nothing
is wrong
and we are not worried
about money and
going to bed
and finding his clothes
on the lawn. His dashboard
that mom kicked in. Life is really
just some sugary powdery mess
and we enjoy every single bit of it.

AND I BELIEVED HIM

Men can wear pink underwear sometimes. That's what my dad said. When I caught him putting a piece of pink paper in his ripped butt pocket to cover the hole. And, I believed him. It is okay to have a few holes in your pants. That's what my dad said and you may cry into the water fountains sometimes. That's what my dad said. And I believed him. I believed everything he said.

Your mother loves me very much. That's what my dad said. Even with all her all pushing, shoving, pinching, pricking, and pulling. I believed him. But, in the books at school, even the ones about cats and frogs and the sky, the frog didn't try to throw a chair at the fish she was courting, and the sky never threatened the sun like that. But dad was in love, he said. And I believed him. Because maybe everything is not like how it is in second-grade books on animals and skies. The frog probably grabbed her fish lover's hair a few times. The sky probably screams at the earth every so often. My dad must be right.

Because he sometimes wore khaki pants with holes in them and no-one said a word. Because I caught him sobbing in a water fountain once in high school and afterwards he said, "I feel much better." You can paperclip your prayers to the wind. My dad said. And I believed him. So, I bought a whole stack of paperclips. To pray that my father never died.

Before I left for college, my dad reminded me that if you ride your bike every day and eat chocolate cake only in the morning and go to synagogue three times a day like me, you are going to live a long life. That's what my dad said.

So, when my dad died soon after I entered college, I stood there looking at his grave, still thinking he must be having a long life somewhere else. I believed those prayers I paper-clipped to the wind. Dead people are made from sequins and sunrise. My dad said. And I believed him. Now, I can see him whenever I want.

But, the man I'm dating currently in grad school doesn't wear pink underwear. Not even once. And we never push, shove, pinch, or prick each other. And in all the books I read to my friend's kid, the animals are falling in love and the dogs are holding hands in the park and chipmunks are giving each other nuts as signs of love.

But yesterday would have been my father's birthday and I was sobbing into a water fountain. Afterwards, I felt much better.

AND WE LEFT HIM THERE LIKE THAT

father's not unsteady
breath or even an echo now

father a body
silenced, sliced, never returning.
we are too many
questions to ask his bones.

we can't remember
if he smelled more like paprika
or orange juice
if he prayed

with feet spaced far apart
or close together
if he gave the ghosts
a different name
his father who gambled
the torn-up linoleum
after the police came

and we can't remember
how bad his hair frizzed
when it was humid and which
body part he hated more
his left arm or his entire right hand

how often he wore his one good shirt

white button-down halfway faded to yellow or how far
his stomach hung over his pants like a chandelier trying
to bring light to the rest of his body.

Section Two

PRAYERS FOR THE DEAD

I. for the one we did not like

after the really fat cousin and the really skinny cousin
 have finished talking through the funeral
 we bring out a drum
 to sound out a new rhythm for the dying
 please crease the dead's laughter into love
 even if we hated them
 amen

II. for the one we loved

turn over the garbage can to get out my rage.
 pain in the part of my heart that does not grow back.
 my hands feed you your dust through your grave
 I'm going to love you more than
 the dignity of New York City apartment lights
 that are barely bright but bright enough
 amen

III. for the one we loved so much we cannot even pray

I'm sleeping with the table cloth
 to remember the
 grease of something warm
 prayer latches onto me with skin
 but I cannot pray
 I am only approaching water
 for things uncured with tissue and a cough drop
 amen

IV. for ourselves

which way does the heat blow into an artery?
and blow us up
we call off wedding dates
and graduate from death
we are not cold coffin calmed
but busted blooming boxes of dew
amen

IN THE NEXT LIFE

I'm going to dance with my mother.
 twirls around the kitchen.
 She will be pleasantly plump and
 the chandelier in the kitchen will not break.
 she will say my name over and over like it is her favorite vegetable
 and we will hug and feel the weight of the ghosts in our pulse.

in this life, my mother lost her glasses but found a safety pin she could use as a weapon.
 she curses at the kitchen sink and pretends it is my dead father.
 rips off pieces of the curtains and balls them up in her fist
 and says, "these are my feelings."
 calls me only when she is out of shaving cream
 or lightbulbs.

in this life, my mother covered the holes she made in the walls
 with paintings of yellow flowers and people in French cafes sipping coffee
 but never pictures of the sky.
 there is still the dream of the girl who drew
 shapes of mother and daughter dancing
 with the blue wallpaper standing still.
 and I will put my head on her heart
 as we twirl in our matching purple pantyhose.
 love holding us together more than gravity

in the next life, I will be fifteen or sixteen,
 the age when teen girls decide they do not need their mothers
 but I will paint my nails the same grandma maroon as hers,
 and talk about how great the color looks when we sway
 with all the lights turned low.

WHAT HAPPENED TO BROOKLYN

Brooklyn does not know what happened.
 Brooklyn does not understand what is going on.
 Brooklyn used to be a tough woman. When we said her name,
they shivered. *They* cringed. *They* stiffened.
 Put their hands in their pockets
 hoping they had still had their wallet and keys
 in case they had to use the keys
 as a weapon.
 We thought
 we did a good job scaring *them* away.
 We told *them* if you went to Kings Highway
 where the Russians lived, the Russian mob
 would come after you. We told *them*
 if you went to parts of Flatbush
 and Crown Heights where all the Orthodox Jews
 with the eleven kids lived, you would
 somehow get pregnant and wind up
 with eleven kids, even though we knew
they only wanted one kid named "Apple."
 We thought we had *them* quarantined in those fancy parts
 of Manhattan. All the hipsters with their Starbucks and Chipotles
 and organic laundromats (what the hell
 is that), and artisan coffee.
 We knew
 we were Manhahattan's ugly ethnic sister
 who no-one ever visited but we were proud.
 We opened
 one of a kind mom- and- pop clothing stores
 named "Beverly Boutique" on Kings Highway
 and explained all the clothes only in Russian
 when a customer walked in. We made
 Caribbean dishes at "Christie's Jamaican Patties"
 in Flatbush and didn't go into depth about
 what each dish was so the White people
 might walk out.

We all cut off our little slice of ethnic heaven for ourselves.

Brooklyn, you made us

a heaven. Brooklyn, you breed angels.

Angels

in the Caribbean family who owned the restaurant

for close to 50 years. Angels in the owners who managed

the clothing store for over a decade.

When *they* came over, they put a Chipotle

in place of the one of a kind

clothing store on Kings Highway.

BREATHING

still telling the same story in the hospital
about how grandma was choking and choking on that pill
but she got it down with just a little bit of applesauce
still hair set in rollers at age 82
that rainbow-colored housedress
with one quarter in the pocket

still hard-boiling an egg on the stove for grandpa
who wears half a nightie and nothing else
he always just got a haircut
grandma wants him to stay
her man to show off to the neighbors through the window

still a song caught in her pancreas
of the men of her youth
that caused blisters and cuts

until she curls her way up into the air
her mouth a prayer without words
her lungs dried plums
then just a stem.

GREASY HEAVEN

Dad, I never told you about the time I accidentally saw you peeing
 that was the day I realized men are nothing to worry about because
 penises really don't have eyes
 I never told you that I went to synagogue and I never prayed
 I never prayed
 except for a mother
 and not just the ones we made
 that we fashioned out of paper clips and goodbye

Dad, I never told you that when I danced
 I was dancing for my greasy heaven
 for floors so slick with our cries
 I thought we would slip until we flew

I never told you
 that every part of you that broke
 I carried in my throat
 you are every poem I spoke
 death did not interrupt the speaking just the breathing

I never told you about the money I stole
 the quarters I took that were supposed to be just enough for pizza
 I made a dollar to buy a lottery ticket
 daddy, I'll buy better lamp shades
 I'll get more windows
 we need more light
 in the dark things can burn, people can break

I never told you about the day god sat down next to me on the train
 and didn't introduce himself, tell me his name
 but that god was holding a bed frame
 and a bag of our dead
 to salt the skyline with
 dad, your body breeds bread
 keep this underfed Brooklyn fed

I never told you
about the men I kissed
or about how often I have heard you
when you sat on the edge of your body and screamed and screamed for a new one
now your eyes have no moments
you can't see me

I'm dancing for that sky
for that greasy heaven
with floors so wet with our cries
daddy, I'm dancing so hard so we can slip until we fly

GHOST

he said he wanted to do it an elevator
so, before I'm graying
and my ghost is more ravishing than I am
I want our bodies quaking the psalms between floors

I am learning how love reclaims us
With each mark he leaves on me

I'll find myself becoming
more kind and if it's so rough that I break

I will hold a vigil for my bones
tonight, it is just you squeezing

a valve in my heart
forget the others I sink my teeth into

THIS WAS NOT THAT FLICKER

I want to hold you for the remainder of this train ride
your skin rattling against mine
heaven must be holiest in your mouth
and the spaghetti sauce will taste just right when I am with you

but still I imagine
I would somehow start dancing with you in a field
though you probably don't like fields
with your baseball cap on more
like artillery shell

and the door will be left open on just the right angle
so that everyone knows we are doing it but not exactly how we are doing it
they will see that I put the good china out
in case we ever make it into the kitchen

DEAR MOM (OR I HATE TO BREAK IT TO YOU BUT THE SKY IS A WHORE, TOO)

The sky lets it all hang out. The clouds are like the sky's breasts. And do you ever see the sky at night? How it glitters with all those stars. So that's where I get it from.

I get it from the stars. I get it from the rocks. Look at how much they enjoy being turned over.

So, Mom you can stop telling me I need to get a separate hotel room from my boyfriend when we go to the casino or insist that I don't use any of the towels he touches. Look at the leaves.

How they almost smile when they are getting blown over? How much do they enjoy just being put on their back once in a while. They like that sticky delicate honey too.

Everyone is ecstatic when their body gets interrupted. I've just been waiting for someone to suck on the nutmeg of my heart. I want someone extracting oxygen from my lips. Everyone likes that drastic reptilian arch on their back. Everyone likes that silky acceleration of two bodies together. Everyone.

The sky is a whore too.

And that's where I get it from. You can tell the neighbors that when they see me dancing naked in the middle of the road with my body shimmering, I saw the sky do it.

The leaves. The rocks. Everyone.

PURITY

all the men in brother's ward wanted to marry me
their smiles happened when nothing was funny
and nothing was happy
the chairs were always warm with grief
the men were snorting up steam and piss
some of them looked like past boyfriends
whose bed sheets smelled like a kind of love
and one man always had to use the phone
to scream psalms to no one on the other end
still, these men were beautiful
brother wished they dressed up despair to have great legs he walked around with his soul
hanging out talking to himself about heaven and people
turning on him and owing money and holes in his underwear
the more he tried to peel off his body
the more his skeleton grew back in silence

HOW TO TELL AN ABUSE STORY TO NEW YORKERS

After the tenth time it happened—or was it the eighth time, or the eleventh time—I walked to the bodega on the corner and brought a six-pack of donuts. The mini powdered donuts with the white sweetness that gets on everything. This was not my first-choice bodega, but it was close. It smelled of ham, beer, and body odor.

The guy behind the counter started working on me the moment I walked through the door. "Oh, the pretty lady is here tonight," he announced to the empty store. I looked up at him and blushed with all of the awkwardness of a sixteen-year-old. Trying not to meet his eyes, I handed over the donuts. "A package of donuts for the lady!" He yelled, holding the package up as he scanned it and winked.

Luckily his cat found a mouse and he ran off to congratulate his cat. I left the store with my donuts. Above anything, New Yorkers want to know you have the ability to get hit on. So start the story like this, even if you were never hit on, even if the story started two days ago or ten years ago when you were six and got the first bruise on your arm.

This was not my first bruise. It throbbed. Let's not call it a bruise. Or a scar. Let's not examine it and invent pretty metaphors for it. It's not a mini-constellation or the size of Texas or a badly shaped comma. The first time it happened, and I came up with many names, and it still hurt. So I fought the urge to name it. I wandered down the empty street. I ate one of the donuts and then threw the rest on the pavement. Each of the donuts fell to the ground, one by one, in five soft thuds.

My arm throbbed. But let's not talk about how much it hurt. Let's not try to figure out why she did it. Once the *yenta* woman at synagogue with the big pearls and bigger mouth said what my mother "had" or what might be "wrong" with her. All I knew was that my mother would take a plate of salad dressing every time she went to a buffet, but she never got any salad.

The tenth time it happened. Or the sixth time or the twelfth time. Right before I got that pack of donuts. She lunged at me and she.

This is probably the part where I would tell the whole story. I would say exactly how she lunged at me. I'd name every angle and exactly how our bodies were positioned. I'd turn it into some sort of dance with me slowly falling to the ground. I'd explain for a paragraph the look of rage on her face. Go into the categories of her rage: her living room rage and her bedroom rage. Because I thought that's what people in New York liked. Categories. We categorize our hookups, our coffees, our mornings. We categorize everything, so we don't have to actually listen.

So, no. I'll only tell what happened after. I went to the bodega and got a six-pack of powdered mini donuts. The kind that sticks to things. The man behind the counter flirted with me. I dropped the donuts on the street and listened to the thud as each one fell. The next morning, one of the donuts was still laying on the ground. Because some things that fall just stay there.

THEY ARE WAITING FOR US TO DIE

They gave us a dirty and rough dawn
that swift purge of all things golden
as if we lost suns and only inherited
premature back pain and our father's
gambling problem. We wish

we could rewrite our throats
to speak as if our mothers loved us.
We must tell the youth shelter our name
repeatedly but the window always remembers
my shame when I press my ear against it.

My bunkmate has fallen victim to what
they call heaven. She does not know
about the graffiti they will feed
our tombstones. They said once
we were dead, they could write all over us.

Before I die, I wanted to give my voice
back to the sky so it won't be taken from me.
I wake up, already dreaming, and see us
snorkeling through garbage cans.
We do remember god.

The way that He was flame and door.
The way He told us leave home.
He thought we were going to die
because our mothers don't want visitors,
because we know our mothers

even if only through hospital curtains
and bed pans. They want their "freedom."
"Freedom is a nice verb to use
in sentences," said my English teacher.
But that word will suck your tongue dry

and make you put your ear up to as much heartache as you can. Now mother talks about father's "freedom." He didn't come home after he died. And once we were dead, too, they could write all over us.

IF THE DARKNESS

I've always said, if the darkness is going to come, let it come then. Being in a shelter can do that to you. I don't want to be surprised anymore. Like when the biggest girl in my room on the first night tells me, if you step on my stuff, I will punch you. I kind of want to step on her stuff already, so she can punch me. And this can all be over with. The darkness can come.

I know that the heart is just music. It stops playing one day. If the darkness is going to come, let it come then. If I'm meant to die in this shelter, I'd prefer for it to happen already. Instead of this. You might die here. But you might live.

Let the darkness come quickly. Let it come now. Let the counselors in the shelter tell me they need my bed and send me onto the street. Let the big girl punch me. Let me eat the darkness like it was a crepe at 3am and I just can't get enough of it. Let that darkness fill every crater in my body. I want to know what it's like to be filled with so much darkness. My body just quakes.

I'm all black-out. Dark alley. Nighttime sky. Make me that.

The counselors say a kid like me needs to have some sort of hope. To believe that I'll maybe get out of this shelter and that home will be a safe place again. I don't like the sound of the word "maybe."

Words like *free*, *safety*, *mother* and *love* are wrinkly bits of light.

Let that word go. Because if the darkness is going to come, then let the darkness come.

Let all the words go. Words are the only thing keeping me here.

BOX

after everything has been packed away
in that box, all of father's body
with all of his memories
let him drink coffee with his skin unregistered
let him escape the prison of his always-praying hands
but don't make him come out and play with his children when he can't remember
how they smelled
and would be too embarrassed to touch their faces

ALWAYS

The rabbis told me that if
I did more good deeds
the dead would come back.

My father will always be dead.

I helped a homeless man
tie his shoe
and gave my lunch to a friend.

My father will always be dead.

I opened the door for all the old women
who went into the bank on 5th Ave (and a lot
of old women go into that bank)
and let someone cut me in line at the store.

My father will always be dead.

The last thing I told my father was “Shalom.”
“Shalom” means hi, goodbye and peace.
After the third or fourth expulsion,
we Jews got a little too used to
people just being taken from us.
Perhaps the word meant only for “goodbye”
got taken from us too.

My father will always be dead.

The only word we have for the dead is “neshama.”
It means soul.
The rabbis say the soul of the dead is still with you.
As if the person never even died
at all.

My father will always be dead.

So where do I start
the story of how he died then?
Do I begin it at the site of the car crash
and come up with metaphors for
what his body must have looked like?

Or perhaps I should not tell the story at all.
In case it is not true.
In all the dreams, I have of my father
he does not know he is dead.
Every time I tell him,
his face crumples as if to say

*His heart steamed to water.
His pulse ran out of melody.*

*I thought I could come back
And Daddy, I thought so too.*

Section Three

HERE, IS THAT ENOUGH WORLD FOR YOU?

sturdy dirt
seeds of
brooklyn
the song of
the peed-on
mattress.
window
sings
whisper to
god
dreams taste salty here
where all they sell is
too many kinds of potato chips
at the newsstand
over the roof
the kids play circling over their death
our rivers are not grateful
are not blossom.
we are only deeply humming
into our homelands
our organs are
groceries placed on the table
struck from inside.
neglected marrows
our tears hard as walnuts
the dark has teeth
the dark always had teeth
so ripen our wounds
unbroken as glass

WHAT MY LONELINESS WHISPERS BEHIND MY BACK

it says, see, I told you that Jewish girls with pretty hair don't exist, that it was a bad idea to paint your bathroom that shade of blue, that ice cream should not really be bought in that flavor on a date. the loneliness whispers, I told you, stop breaking windows trying to fit your body through them and you almost coughed up blood on purpose but don't tell the doctor or your mother. they will find a reason to put you in a hospital and the hospital walls will be gray and the loneliness says gray will remind you of that boy who gave you his sweatshirt at a bonfire at some Jewish camp late night ritual thing and the crying will start all over again just when you were starting to watch the television. the therapist says to go to the happy place, and the doctor gives you a pill. you like the doctor better because it takes too long and too many crinkles of the forehead to go to the happy place. and the loneliness reminds you that momma said you always had a poor sense of direction and got lost just going to the store. you wound up in Coney Island once. remember that. and you didn't want to get back on the right train to go home. because home feels like a pile of leaves next to a dead raccoon. you're scared to touch the leaves because you will have to look at the raccoon. that's what home is. too scary and too dead. to be beautiful.

RULES FOR A JEWISH SOUP KITCHEN

Masbia is the only kosher soup kitchen in Brooklyn with two locations in Borough Park and Flatbush. The soup kitchen primarily serves the Orthodox Jewish and Russian Jewish population of Brooklyn.

1. Come to the soup kitchen with your list of fake but possible Jewish names to write on the sign-up sheet. Names like Sarah. Rachel, or Leah. A name that could be your name but isn't.
2. Write a different fake name every day of the week that you go to the soup kitchen. On Monday, my mother's name was Sarah. On Tuesday it's was Chana Leah. Never include a last name.
3. Do not ask the rabbi at the sign-up desk what is for dinner because it is always chicken. Fried chicken. Honey-barbecue. Roasted. Grilled chicken. It's always chicken.
4. Do not look around the soup kitchen. I always make the mistake of looking around the soup kitchen when I am eating. Don't look because:
 - a. this catches the attention of the Russian old men with debatable teeth who try to give me their extra pineapple chunks.
 - b. this makes me the subject of Phyllis's comments on my dress.
 - c. Phyllis must announce to the whole kitchen how beautiful I am.
 - d. Phyllis carries a suitcase around with her but don't ever ask what is in the suitcase.
5. Never say that you are going to the soup kitchen to eat. Say that you are going to make a "social call." But we all know we are going to the soup kitchen because Mom has run up too much credit card debt, or Igor, the Russian man with the debatable teeth, is on food stamps and has run out in the second week of the month.
6. Don't sit in the far right corner because the elderly man sits in the far right corner, always with long sleeves, even in the summer.

7. A. He is a survivor. B. On food stamps. The newspapers read that “Of the 50,000 Holocaust survivors residing in the New York Metropolitan area, 52% are considered “poor,” living below 150% of federal poverty guidelines. C. Survivors from the former Soviet Union have it particularly bad...with 80% of them living in poverty.

8. Let mother always get to the soup kitchen first and text you the menu. It is chicken. But a different kind of chicken this time. You would like it. And a nice filling soup. So, come.

9. Eat the soup. The soup is not filling. Not even somewhat filling. It is watered down carrots and peas. I eat it. There is nothing edible in the fridge at home.

10. Do not talk about your life at home. A lot of the people in the soup kitchen have nothing to eat at home. But nobody talks about home in the soup kitchen. People don’t want to know why you are here.

11. But you are here. So, there are other obligations. If you hear a blessing or a *bracha* made on the bread, you must answer *amen*. That is the real reason why we are here, we tell ourselves: to eat and be the amen to someone else’s *bracha*.

12. Come with your amens prepared as well as some shopping bags or a suitcase. My mother always brings the shopping bags to wrap up my chicken meal and eat it later. Some women are bolder. When the rabbi at the front desk is not looking, they slip whole slices of rye bread and pickles into their suitcase.

13. Don’t read the newspapers because there is a newspaper sitting at one of the tables. A, The headlines states “Jewish poverty skyrockets in New York. Doubles since 1991.” B. The article says that 45% of children living in Jewish households live in poor or near-poor conditions. C. The largest group of poor Jewish households remain those of Russian-speaking seniors.

14. Don’t listen to the rabbi who runs the list. He likes to shout when we talk too much. “Only thirty minutes to eat. Only thirty minutes.” Of course Jews talk too much, and we all take longer than thirty minutes to eat.

15. Smile when the rabbi yells. My mother smiles when the rabbi yells. Other people giggle. The Orthodox woman who comes in every day with the three children—ages five, two, and two months—laughs as well. The children laugh in unison.

16. Laugh and always ask for the extras. The rye bread and pickles are not given automatically, so you have to say yes when the volunteers come around. And then ask for the iced tea. They have the iced tea in the back, of course. But it can be brought out.

17. Examine the volunteers closely. One volunteer is going to be a dentist, Phyllis heard. He is handsome, and you should try to flirt with him, my mother says. Just say hello. Phyllis thinks he is a great idea for me. And everyone in the soup kitchen always takes a woman with a suitcase a bit more seriously, for some reason.

18. Don't read the papers. There is a paper on the table that reads the "ignored" Jewish poor."³ For example, seventy-two percent of Russian-speaking Jewish seniors live in poverty in New York, making up 26% of all poor Jewish households. Many do not speak English, and thus find it hard to get work, obtain Social Security, or apply for basic services. It says there are many faces to the Jewish poor. No one characteristic explains poverty to the exclusion of others. The reality is that many Jewish New Yorkers struggle with making enough.

19. Wear a nice outfit to the soup kitchen, my mother suggests. There might be the dentist volunteer there again. I always wear a dress.

20. Wearing a dress feels out of place yet necessary. Gets me a few extra pickles from some Russian men at the other tables and some freshly brewed iced tea.

21. Phyllis and my mother laugh. Wearing the dress to get the extra food seems

Worth it.

THE POOR NEED ENTERTAINMENT, TOO

we always entertained our death and dressed for it
oh, the little things that we do to make the earth
a little more red and flushed with dreams in soil
we cannot let the sky fall right smack in our corn
and cobwebs, like “hey, we were learning how to read here”

the past is heavy with fat
with bleeding the stars out of the flag

the deaths keep us company when nothing else will
so, let the rich kids have their chicken sandwiches with lettuce,
their chamomile tea before bed

I’m tonguing the light through my shoes
the darkness runs in our skim milk, in our choking sardines out a can
we dress up death down to our underpants
because we want flowers on the grave
and a moonrise, that forever gown

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WOMAN (OR I JUST WANT MY PUSSY TO SMELL LIKE POTPOURRI)

I've been sitting in front of the mirror a lot and comparing the shape of my left eyebrow to the slope of my right breast. I've been looking for the curve in everything. And I've been doing the math of my moustache hairs. How many I have and how long it will take to tweeze each one before my boyfriend gets home.

Being a woman starts with looking for those curves but it never ends. Until after death. I still have the duty of dying. Of collapsing one heartbeat on top of another and calling it good. But till then, I've been watching my own ass in the mirror. How it wiggles and jiggles and giving nicknames to my ass. Calling it Mary and Samson and other biblical yet cool and approachable names and leaving glasses of water around my apartment.

I've been remembering to drink lots of water to help me stop farting. The salvation of today is already in my fart. I've been farting a lot and calling that just a gray area between love and hate. All of this screams woman. My left leg aches of woman when I stand on it for too long while shaving my legs or standing with a washcloth smothered in body wash making my pussy smell like potpourri. All I want is a potpourri pussy.

To smell good is to be good-enough-for-God-good. And to be good- enough-for- God- good. Is to have a potpourri pussy. That screams woman and marry me and love letter to divided thighs and let me dilate my pupils just, so I can see inside me better.

And to be right about dying as a woman. Dying as a woman happens so neatly. First the breath goes then the moustache hairs falls off. Finally, the farting stops. But, the pussy goes on a long time after still smelling like potpourri.

GLASSY WITH HER HEART

The therapist said
she had a glassy heart
and everything made it
break.

When that man from down the block
littered her
body
she fell
apart.

Her grandmother would say
there are more popular things than dying.
So why don't you eat some crackers or watch the
sky.

All this talk of suicide and crackers made grandma hungry.
Then Grandma would suggest she drink ginger ale
depression was like a cold.
After the phone call, grandmother wouldn't talk about this
again.

There was just a note from the man saying to stop trying to add him as a friend on Facebook. And it was only one night but he is in Georgia now.

Her grandmother did not understand
how one man could
hurt
her so bad and make the sky so blank
and devoid of stars.

A POEM ABOUT MAKING EGG-CREAM

I'm writing about those tables. About the tables in each house we ever lived in. Daddy always brought the dinner table up first. I liked the table best in the first house we lived in. it was wooden and round with the ability to be made bigger. As if guests were coming over though they never did. What do people do at a dinner table, this sitting down, this place where mother is not hushing bodies into bleeding, her hands cannot cook when they are eternally grieving. Grandmother had no tables just [kitchen counters](#). because kitchen counters had a way of forcing people into loving and were best for making egg-creams.

if you are going to make an egg-cream my grandmother said do it right. Do it right. Put the chocolate in first. Then milk. Seltzer. If your mother gets quiet, if she ever gets quiet, Take the squares of silence, put them in your pocket. You'll need them later, then swear and hear the clinking of the spoon next make music with your thighs. I interpret this to mean the men folding up sky. It was two-fourths chocolate, one fourth milk, and a little seltzer when you couldn't get bread.

Something went cold when I touched that egg-cream to my lips. when I swore. when I used math to remember I was beautiful. if the ratio of how times I've been told I'm beautiful to how many times I've looked in the mirror and cursed myself is less than what is multiplied by the men smiling on the street and those who give me their number then I'm pretty. Officially pretty. in that magazine if "a guy likes you, do this" way and god arrives in a sedan or four wheel drive or a slightly marked up red vehicle. But not a truck.

All the men I fall in love with drive trucks. Trucks as big as their dicks they say. Except this time they aren't lying . Their dicks really are that big. Dicks that are huge containers for their spit. All their words Things that got to be big first so you doubt if their voice will fit. Well something in me is clenched like the fury of fist every night. Something doesn't want him there. Never wanted there. Though I liked his truck. His truck drew in dreams closer to me. poured back laughter into my lungs in the front seat. Let hope be put on, that ill-fitting sweater. They are so noisy with pulse, I forget the clinking of the spoon, my father's tables. We eat dinners on the dashboards, the dressers, the disaster of a restaurant.

The years we leave in the oven. Put your heartbreak to a steam, let it come to a boil, grandmother said. Drop in your mother and if you don't have your father, just his underwear, the kitchen chairs, some prune juice and the broken refrigerator. You've been planted here to march. So march to the place where grandmother sat making death seem less like something brought in with the broken window screen.

I am everything but dust because contrary to popular belief when we die, we do not turn to dust. we turn to milk. Craters of chocolate in our grandmother's egg creams. But the man in the truck wasn't there for the music in the kitchen. grandma give me chocolate covered lungs. give me your good lung grandma to take from. Let me live please o please let me live and live off egg cream.

DISASTER IS WHEN

her toothbrush falls into the sink
and she burned
her curls on the hair straightener
because she was trying
to get ready for this date.

and her parents gave her a hug.
and then she went out on the date.
the date paid for her drink
but made her pay for her own pretzel.

and I'm thinking "White Girl Problems."
but more like NYC" I live in east village but work in Soho problems."
but more like "I had two great loving parents who now pay for my
East Village apartment problems"

but she knows that I have "The Other New York Problems"
where you wouldn't have a straightener anyways.
so, you wouldn't get burned getting ready for the date.
and you might not even go on a "date"
you might go to the park or the corner and call it a "date" when he kisses you.

and my date tells me that disaster comes from the Greek meaning *bad stars*
and bad stars means when the stars aren't aligned.
but I'm Jewish and we don't believe in astrology, so I'll just call it stars.

those stars are only bad on one side of the sky then.
on our side.

where my mother has not changed her clothes in eight weeks
and my brother walks back and forth to the synagogue hoping God will
change things.

my brother did drop his toothbrush in the toilet
and my mother screamed for three days about it.
because it was a “good” toothbrush.
but disaster just means bad stars.
So, let mother scream
into the open window
until the nighttime sky wakes up.

THE RICH PEOPLE LIST

1. PUTTING ON YOUR COAT

when you have a lot of money is done in one
 swooping motion
 and then three quick brushes to get rid of lint.
 Not like how we buy a puffy yellow coat on sale
 and popular five years ago, cram it full of store receipts

 and take five minutes just to get the arms through.

2. SITTING ON A COUCH

is a huge ordeal for a rich person
 because first, they must decide
 just by looking at the couch
 if the couch is good enough for their special behinds.
 There is no way to know if the couches in the library
 or the government buildings are clean.

This is why rich people stand a lot in public places
 and live much longer.

3. TALKING TO THE DEAD

is a stinky chore when you are rich.
 It's like taking out the garbage.
 You pay other people to do it.
 You do not want to bring flowers
 to a graveyard and see the stone
 of old Aunt Martha again and ask her
 how she is doing and remember
 that people must be dead somewhere.

4. ICE CREAM CHOICES

are limited for us. The poor talk to the dead
 all the time from their living rooms
 because like most things we have borrowed
 we do not know when God wants us back
 or if God even likes us. He must like rich people
 better, which is why they have frozen yogurt
 and we got discount ice cream
 on dates with men from trailer parks
 who just figured out how to do their hair.

5. DATING

Is done quickly.
 My date from the trailer park
 wears just the right amount
 of hair gel and claims that rich people
 have a smell. I agree with him
 and ask to touch his hair.
 Then my date and I leave the bar
 to find a couch to make out on
 talk to the dead and eat an ice cream.
 Trying to do everything in just one night
 before God decides he wants us back.

SOME MEN

Some men just know how to fuck. It's something that certain men just to know how to do. I can always figure it out. When we go on the date, they start to tell me about their career or what they brought their mom for Christmas.

Thinking I will be impressed by a man who has a job or sends a basket of tea with inspiring sayings on each tea bag to his mother. I'm more impressed by a man who does not put a napkin on his lap. Means he is not afraid to get messy with it. Slams his glass on the table. Good sign. Can be a bit aggressive. Washes his hands before and after he eats. That date will end early. Too scared to get dirty.

I know how to watch them. How to get them to open up. Tell me stories about their mother, their father, their crazy uncle who shoots a lot of guns. The men who just know how to fuck, know how to tell a good story too. I would never trust a man with my body if I didn't like his stories.

I knew I hit it good when I met this one. He had blue eyes, six feet tall, unruly blondish reddish hair, always slammed his glass on the table and did not touch his napkin at all. His stories started off slow. That was a good sign.

The story was about his aunt. How his aunt was married to a doctor and they had three children. They lived in an old house with an awful toilet. The aunt then cheated on her doctor husband with the plumber. His aunt used to seduce the plumber with pot-roasts made from scratch and her unusually large breasts. The way he said the word "breasts." How he stretched out every syllable of that word, even though it was only one syllable. That was a good sign He liked to savor things.

And just how long it took to get to the cheating in the story, how I had to listen to every characteristic of what makes a bad toilet and how many years the house had been falling apart. This let me know he did not rush just to get to the good parts.

So, I had to take him home. Let him practice his storytelling on me. Stuff his words in the spaces between my bones. Everything about him leaves a memory, every bit of his language stays.

I like men who tell stories like they expect you to remember them. Who fuck like they expect you to remember it. When he started, he started off slow like the story of his aunt. There was just his aunt. There was just one kiss. And then two. And then three. Every kiss told a story of what more he wanted to do to my body. And I let it.

When the story ended, he collapsed on top of me so hard, I thought that he broke a lung or added an extra heartbeat. His weight crushed me. But I did not want him to go. I think I just learned another way to breathe. I now had his story inside me.

DREAMS TASTE SALTY HERE

in synagogue yesterday
 my mother told me love felt
 it felt like water. branches. tongue.
 I gathered that love in my hands
 and put it in my dresser next to
 the cotton balls and underwear
 because all we have is a sky smeared
 like butter across the top of half
 of the buildings
 brooklyn pavement
 smells of pineapple chunks
 I know because I've kissed it
 when the sun comes up scattered at sunrise

mother and I danced with our shoppings bags
 and split open the creases in our hearts
 something had unwrinkled us
 so we rocked back on our heels and praised
 the park benches on flatbush
 avenue and the way the streets curved like a woman's body
 (brooklyn will be someone's
 favorite daughter someday)
 didn't brooklyn used to sand the dying
 polish their dead? What happened to our way of death?

mom still likes the bring the potatoes
 and meatballs to the cemetery for daddy
 She feeds the dead because they are living
 so hungry
 and Brooklyn
 is the housekeeper for the poor
 dreams taste salty here
 where all they sell is too many kinds
 of potato chips and coffee at the newsstand

the soup kitchen is busy tonight
and it empties at eight with a sigh
brooklyn is esophagus-wonderful
swallowing breath
I know it's been holding the people
in their bodies so heavy
with their shadows
people emulate their version
of sky and here the stars are underweight

but still
coat me in my brooklyn broken
I love how I sound
when I'm bowed

WORK THE DARK

like it's your best friend.
That's what my mom said.
Go to the bar late at night but go
wearing every piece of jewelry you own.
It's okay if your top is a little see through.
And don't mind the bartenders
if they stare at you.
I'm working the dark, my mom said.
This was before her teeth fell out
Before matted hair in a ball at the top of head.
Before seven hospitals and no solution.
Before they started writing down
"psychosis" because no one knew
what her diagnosis was. This was when
she still used to go out along the avenue
carrying her seven shopping bags
filled with new skirts and all
her jewelry jangling around her neck.
She wanted you to hear her coming.
She wanted you to know she was there.
Now there is just her feet shuffling in hospital slippers.
I can hardly hear her coming.
This is all I have left of a mother

So I'm working the dark.
I'm dancing tonight in a see-through top
and with only my hips
I'll call my mother back from dying.

Section Four

UNLEARNING

this serving of skin
 at the Shabbat table my heart hums in my feet
 weekends loom like hard work
 too many funerals for hands
 (hands that loved forgetting what love felt like)
 I wish I could unlearn my blood

We practice musical eating
 everyone shoves the *challah* into their mouth
 trying to hold onto the rhythm of something
 since in this revised version of love
 daddy's handshakes as he holds the *Kiddush* cup in his right hand
 and mom's leftover rage from breakfast in his other
 we all sit around the Shabbat table
 waiting for god to begin somewhere

I am listening
 for the beginnings of an angel to crawl out of daddy's back
 because the words mother yells at the Shabbat table will hinge open bones
 cause the heart to break itself backwards
 at the table we lay into each other craters
 we make our bodies end
 we sit at the table waiting for beans that never came

I am trying to unlearn my blood
 in this revised version of love
 daddy carries me on his toes
 across the room
 before we sit down to that Shabbat table
 so, I remember I will walk out of here someday

HEAVEN IS FOR FIXER-UPPERS

She was standing there naked
in her living room eating a fruit cup
when she got the call from the hospital with the news.

Her mother was dying
of her own accord.

Her mother
just decided not to eat
or drink again.

Her mother slept with eyes folded towards her heart.
The daughter was naked but ready to give the mother up.

Even though the daughter thought she'd somewhat miss
her mother and how she
played with her toenails while talking on the phone
or bought too much costume jewelry and wore none of it.

The mental hospital did not want to keep her mother.
She refused to shower.
She asked for too many water bottles.

She was a strain on the resources
and she farted too much, besides.
They wanted to send her home to die.

So, the daughter put down the fruit cup and told herself

That dying was okay.
They fix up people like her mother.

Heaven is for fixer-uppers.
For people who choose not to eat.
Who do not brush their hair.

In heaven, her mother could make it with just
three toes and one finger
and God would do the rest.

THE PRACTICE

We have a certain kind of anger. Most anger likes to announce itself. Group home anger is not that.

Marsha had not learned the drop-everything-and-run trick yet. When the anger crept up on her in the middle of dinner, she got *mad*. She punched the walls and the police came. I know this because on my first day at the group home, I asked a counselor, an older woman who smiled too much, what the hole was from. “Marsha did it,” she said. “But don’t worry, she won’t do it again.”

Of course, we all know Marsha did it again. And again. And again, until she almost got kicked out of the home. But she stayed. She used to be afraid of her mom, but now her mom was too afraid of her.

Marsha was two hundred pounds at least. She strutted around the group home with razor scars all over her left arm. She only ever wore baggy t-shirts and sagging sweatpants. I was the smallest girl, tiptoeing around the house and waving at the counselors. I knew the drop-everything-and-run trick. It was as if someone had written a secret list and there were only three things, I could get angry about: the food, someone spending too long in the shower, not getting to go out on Halloween because the gangs were out. The bruise on my left wrist from my mother wasn't on the list. It never healed, and I never got to punch the walls.

I ran to my room when the anger happened and opened my mouth to practice the way a mouth feels when it is screaming: the wideness of the mouth, the way the tongue sticks out, how the muscles around the eyes tense up.

Opening my mouth while looking in the mirror calmed me down. My ability to get angry was still there. A reassuring fact. All my smiling at the counselors and my running to my room whenever I got angry made me a favorite. I was the good one. My mother was mentally ill, but I wasn't like the “others.”—the ones who punched the walls and threw the dinner on the ground.

My story wasn't much different. Except it was. I learned at a young age I would have to be satisfied with just the practice of screaming. Even now, I run my rage to the mirror and open my mouth. Just to know for my own self. My body still knows the motion for yelling. For words unheard traced in my breath on the mirror. Open your mouth but do not say anything. So that they do not think you were about to scream. You were only singing.

ON BEING GOOD

it would have been better if you were.
 If you visited my brother in the hospital
 and didn't spend the whole time looking
 at the ceiling
 instead of
 him.

You are the starched collar Aunt
 and oxford shoes from Connecticut.
 Nails done
 cleavage hanging out at all
 our religious Jewish functions.

My mother says you have plain-looking
 white people hair.

Limp brownish-blond
 hair that carries the date
 of your first sadness.

Small lips that beg
 for liner.

You and your family sniffing up a laugh
 when my mother falls.

I exhale loudly into your windowsill
 hoping to crack it
 so, glass
 lands all at your feet
 so, you stand there with now
 half a window

still telling me how to dress and that
 I should really
 get a straightener
 and we have to use a separate tissue box at your house
 and you will shampoo the couch
 after we have left

My uncle didn't really want
to marry you anyway
he wanted a nice Jewish girl
who occasionally
smoked on the railings of the synagogue
but he chose a woman so
devoid of soft
and the language of hands
how foreign to you is
our praying.

I WONDER IF MY PARENTS HAD PET NAMES FOR EACH OTHER

I have pictures of their wedding
Where they both wore white.

Someone referred to them as “sparkling.” Another person said they looked
“radiant.”

But their love wasn’t radiant. Their love was greasy. Was grimy. Was gardens in
atrophy. Was sand-blasted cornfields. Was try dancing in a minefield. I know
what their love was since I drowned in it. I gained weight in it. I fed in it. I know
what their love was. Since it summoned me, and it cautioned me and it tore into
my flesh. Their love bothered me. On a blood-platelet level. Their love
reminded me of really bad sex where you just want to go back on your cell-
phone right after it is over with no cuddling.

Instead of “bitch” and “fuckface” and “piece of shit”
I wondered if they called each other nice names
Such as “kitty” and “fish.”

Their love was grimy and sea salt and interrupted sequins and no dancing ever.
Their love was fucked. Liked being fucked over a million times. Like standing
on a stage and taking a huge piss in front of everyone and then exiting the stage
bawling. Their love was playing an instrument never in tune and always washed
up and darkness around the edges. That’s what their love reminded me of.

Reminded me of stars that got grime on them. That you could never polish.
Then there is my boyfriend that wants me to grow my parents into weeds and
then cut them down with a machete and make them pay for all the years that
they called each other “fuckface.” My boyfriend calls me “kitty” and our love
shines so bright. Sometimes we must dim the lights. Sometimes we must pull
down the brightest stars and breathe them into our lungs.

OUR CUSTOM OF BUILDING

It took me a while to notice the customs that we had
surrounding building our mothers
first with a forest of breath
next credit some angel with pouring dreams in her mouth
she will skim the sunset with her hair
and she's gone purple with trust
the rain will pound out her shadow
I'll find bits of me brittle inside her back
so we won't sell her remains
when she is gone
I will need to break her knees in with prayer
I check for little bits of fists rolled up in the edges of her body
And remove unnecessary hands
then
give her some of that perfume mothers wear
I'll compose my mother's blood
and her heart won't be clouded in her underpants
and she'll always drink soda right out the can
lastly
give her a soul safety pinned to her breast
that doesn't get loose
so the mother I build does not have to hope.

A QUESTION FOR MY RABBI

So, rabbi, if every time you do a *mitzvah*
you grow an angel, then where
does that angel live once it's born?

The rabbi answered with a stare
heavy on me, and it made me
think angels must live everywhere.

Angels in the ribcage
and the heart. One lives
in the stomach or the second intestine

for bodily protection.
This must be the secret reason why
the old Jewish women stand me

in their kitchens to watch me practice
the *bracha* over the bread.
They cough once, anxious,

and say that was very good
now do it again. Because you should
not embarrass anyone,

they do not say I left out a word.
I'm supposed to talk to people
as I was taught to speak on the phone—

politely, extra nice
when the Jewish charity calls.
I'm not going to say a word

about the old woman's daughter
whom I've been watching
and the green skirt that does not go

to her knees when she needs sugar
for her coffee. I dream I will open
the tiny packet with my teeth

and we'll share a kiss and say
some prayer or blessing to get a *mitzvah*
because I really want to grow

an angel for her. Years later
I want to touch her breast and find
shiny and buried inside her ribcage

that angel, still protecting her
with the song grown
long ago inside its wings.

WHAT YOU MADE ME DO

Do the mothers of the famous poets
read their poems?
do they crease their eyelids in unabashed amusement
or throw paper cups at the wall?
scared that if they threw glass
then something would break
and they don't want
it to seem like
their house was a house of breaking
that is why their children write
to get themselves somehow closer to the moon
and further away from the blood
the fragrance of a cut
the mess of the veins
whatever momma drank to forget that she
could also give birth
so, this is why the coffee table was smashed
and if you ever showed her the poem
would she scream
take the canister of your grandmother's ashes
throw it at you
say you disgrace the dead
and look what you made me do
it was always you
from the time you fell off the tricycle
you made her do it
put on her most promising night gown
the one that kind of shows her boobs
that you brought for her on sale
and say
after you have finished writing
find a sadder ocean to bury me in.

WRITING WORKSHOP ADVICE

Do not use words like

Dichotomy

Transcendence

Dubious

Caliber

When workshoppping this poem.

This is not that kind of poem.

this poem was written by a depressed woman who
couldn't put her forks in the proper place in the silverware bin
or line up her shoes.
she started talking to God after a five-year break.

don't try to analyze the poem so much or use three-syllable words

so you sound smart talking about this poem.

This is the only poem she came up with so

she just brought it to the workshop

and she was going to write a poem called

"The Hipster Kings of Brooklyn"

about how they tore down the Russian pharmacy

to build a Starbucks and how two confused Russian women

tried to take the pharmacy back.

But those women would never read that poem.

She does not know why she would bring it to workshop.

This is not that kind of poem.

GETTING ACQUAINTED

So, I took this Thanksgiving to get myself real acquainted with white people cause somebody told me I was their people so I figured I might as well learn. So, I'm hiding the poverty under my hair and looking at the white people clothes. The clothes got to be proper and I guess I didn't white myself up enough.

I guess my ass was sticking out a little too much and I like to tuck my shirt into my jeans but they got their shirts covering their butts and they are obsessed with making sure just the right amount of ass is showing. Got to be enough so that you know there is an ass but not too much ass showing. But, see mine just be hanging out there real full and noticeable. How I like it. Cause if you gonna be this world you got to put your ass fully in there too. I guess I wasn't white enough, didn't white myself up, instead I sat and wrote myself up.

Then there are, the colors of clothes, These white people got two colors black and what they call a neutral: gray, tan, beige. I prefer to look like Christmas lights, to look like I'm coming into my spring, to look like something worth living for. I guess I wasn't white enough, didn't white myself up, instead I sat and wrote myself up.

At the thanksgiving table, they make too big a deal over their babies. White people think their little children got to be something special and not just popping peeing things like everyone else's. They looking at me like I must have got it all wrong somehow, like I couldn't possibly belong to them because I white like this. I write like this.

I am too much dirt, I am too much tight jeaned and and leaning in too close to boys and I don't know how much ass to give and how much to hide. They think my skin too dirty. I must have found my skin in an alleyway or a garbage can.

Because I'm white like this. I write like this and I guess I ain't doing white right, but I prefer to write anyway.

LOVE STINKS

I know because I was in love once.
 Or maybe three times.
 Or four.
 I lost count, but I remember the stench
 of my lovers.

But I snuggled close to him anyway.
 How one used to take his socks off before bed and leave them hanging by the door.
 His feet smelled, and I wish he left his socks on.
 But I snuggled close to him anyway.
 How one used to leave all his clothes on right from the gym.
 I wish he took his clothes off.

One showered too much and one not enough.
 The one who showered too much and liked deodorant always smelled like
 lemon grass.
 No matter the smell, every lover burped.
 I remember how each kiss tasted just after a burp.
 But I still kissed them all anyway.
 Full-on regardless of the burp.
 Love makes you do that sometimes.

I know how love works because I studied it with my last lover.
 The number of kisses before we parted each day always had to be three.
 One kiss on the hand. One kiss on the lips. And one on the cheek.
 And I know this is how his love had to be done. Orderly and neat.
 Other love came to me haphazard and whirlwind.
 Five kisses on the lips one night and a small peck the next night.

Learned how love was a knowing in the eyelids. Because how much I was loved
 depended on how many times he said he had a dream about me because
 the only reason I fall in love was to be a glowing figure in a dream a lover has about me.

IT'S ON THE LIST

All the websites said that this vitamin would improve my mood.
That all I had to do was take it three times a day.
And so I took all three pills at once

to forgot if my mom called with the latest news from her nursing home
about how the eggplant parm and salmon
was awful and they served it again and again.

And I took the pills to forget when my brother called
and claimed he was emailing our dead father to help
him market his business but all his messages got returned.

I took the pills to forget.
But instead of forgetting
I started throwing up, of course.

How many cups of ginger ale
or Butterfingers from the store
or watching episodes of *Intervention* would it take till I felt better?

And the will to get better is like a good pastrami sandwich
very hard to find
That's what my father would say to try to make a joke of the whole thing.

I'm laying on the floor after taking the vitamins
saying I do not intend to die.
Even though I keep a list and a schedule of things to do
and dying might have been one of the things
on the list
right up there with
toasting a bagel and paying the rent.

HOW I DEVELOPED A PHOBIA OF VASES

The mother's vase had been knocked over. The vase that the mother claimed was so rare because she won it at a PTA contest. The red and yellow roses were laying on the ground. The living room white linoleum floor had spots of blood on it.

The mother had just finished a round of cursing and hitting. She was foaming at the mouth, face red, the blondish-brownish perm she got three days ago messed up. The father had welts all over his arms from the mother and was trying to stop the blood with his hand.

The girl sees the scene from her room and runs to the bathroom. The girl likes bathrooms a lot. The girl thinks the bathroom is the only place she can go where no-one will come in. The girl goes to bathrooms a lot. Not to use it. But to sing in there. To pray. To talk to herself and of course, look at herself in the mirror.

The girl is short for her age of 13. The girl starts from the top of her head and works her way down to examine herself in the mirror. Maybe this will take up some more time. Maybe, this will make the fighting stop somehow.

The girl must stand on the tops of her toes to see herself properly in the mirror. Starting with the eyebrows, they are way too bushy and look like they are about to come into a unibrow but couldn't quite find a way to kiss yet. The nose is small yet long. Uninteresting. Then there are the lips, puffy and full. Finally, the smile.

The smile has a gap in it. A large gap. You could hide things in that gap. You could hang things in that gap. Lamps. Christmas ornaments (though the girl is Jewish, so she has personally never hung a Christmas ornament.) The girl believes the gap is about the size of a quarter but maybe more. She does not want to get too cliché about the gap in between her teeth. No dreams are hiding in there or an extra dollar for candy for the vending machine. It is just a large gap the girl does not want the other 7th graders to know about or see. The mother refuses to get it fixed. Something about not having the money or the right insurance. Though the girl secretly thinks the mother is just trying to be mean.

Then, we go to the neck. Some dirt that looks like sweat or just not showering enough. It is probably both. The girl stops examining herself at the neck because her breasts are too small and too uninteresting, she would prefer to forget about them.

Besides, the mother's voice is so loud, and the twin brother keeps saying "Calm down, calm down. The police will come." The brother's voice is frenzied like a glass of water being poured quickly from one container to another. The brother always sounds like water for some reason to the girl. The brother always sounds like she is just about to lose him.

The mother voice is different. The mother's voice is like a stone. It has a lot of strength in it and never breaks. "You broke my glasses, you bastard. You broke them." She is yelling at the father. The girl does not know if the father broke the glasses or if the mother just said that he broke her glasses in the process of hitting the father like how she said the kids weren't his to make him feel bad.

The father was bleeding like how the girl fought with her mother a few days before. The girl thinks the fight with her mother was about the radio. Because the mother tried to throw the radio at her. But, the girl does not know what caused the fight or why she was running from room to room in the small Brooklyn apartment trying to get away from her mother.

The girl gets confused about the fights sometimes. What starts them and how in the hell to end them. This is why the girl likes school so much and doctor's appointments because they have beginnings and endings. Schools have bells, and doctors get tired of looking at you, so they just push you out the door. The mother could and will keep screaming until the police come.

The girl knows it is her Brooklyn apartment. So, the girl must have prayed in the bathroom, though you are not supposed to pray in the bathroom according to Jewish law. The girl wants God a lot. Wants God to make the fighting stop. The girl has so many requests for God; she thinks she is bothering him and that he is annoyed with her because she prayed in the bathroom like she should not have.

But, the girl does not want to walk into the living room again and see the vase on the floor. Cracked with the flowers on the white linoleum. The girl will start to develop a phobia of vases, and every time she sees a vase, be reminded of this one incident. The fight with the cracked vase that the mother claimed was so important because the mother supposedly won it at a PTA contest.

If the girl goes back into the living room, she will see the vase cracked on the floor. The girl knows the fight is bad. The father is being hit. And hit a lot. The brother is trying to stop the parents fighting and is getting hit too. The girl hears her father's yelps and "stop it" There is a knock on the door.

Maybe the police.

Section Five

THE SOUL-STUFFING MAN

He vomited me out of his stomach
 Loved me loved me loved me
 I remember how he died
 His arms massaging the backs of the angels
 (even in death you were kind)
 He was a man made out of soul-stuffing
 So, stuffed with our souls
 Souls found in elevator shafts, subways
 my mother's kitchen, those streets
 on Flatbush Ave
 Where death
 is a more livable form of life
 I asked him to squish me with his toes
 To avoid mother's screams
 Take me somewhere where the people dream
 of clean homes and egg-creams

Soul-stuffing man I loved you
 The way his feet smelled when he came home from a long day of work
 And I'm sure he was one of those guys
 who ate cream cheese straight from the jar
 who mixed his whites and colors at the laundromat
 He told me every time he cried his bones sighed for me
 I miss the way he held me
 He wasn't all sharp edges then
 I am scrambling for sky now
 God was a martyr
 He said "you and I lost the same thing"
 Our family in some war
 But even when I felt dust gathering at my own gravesite
 didn't he know what a strong woman he was talking to?
 I could give mouth to mouth to the earth
 I could resuscitate its breathing
 and I would learn to talk again

I say I'm going up to collect him
collect his heartbeat
his body his elbows
I'm going up to get him
God, just let me touch the soup of your skin again

GETTING CLOSE

I want to get so close to God, I can
 smell his breath. I can smell what angel
 he cooked for supper last night. I want to get so close and rest next to his armpit hair,
 inhaling that salty sky and almost dirty laundry scent. That *got home*
at midnight because a little girl was maybe dying odor.
 I'm getting so close to God the angels start poking
 me in the elbow. So deep in him that everything is silence.
 The first father I've had who has not died, God.
 I want to know everything. Get to practice my breathing
 my receiving of all this light. Wish I could bring
 some pull-out couches into his mouth and just lie down
 there or carry a rocking chair down onto his spine.
 I got used to everything being taken away from me.
 This God will be all mine. I want to get so close to God
 that He can hold me inside, keep me safe inside his skin.
 In synagogue, we talk about God and the *ruach* or spirit of Him.
 I just want Him. Not his spirit. Him.
 The first thing I could ever say I owned. My first home
 at his address. Find me in the hearth.
 Bury me in the fireplace of his heart.

COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

I wish I had heard
 that everything
 really is not going to turn out alright
 you will not get that job
 your family will become even more broken
 your brother will be caught up in the psych ward with bad registered nurses named linda
 you will not know what looks good on you
 you will spend hours in front of the mirror
 picking out a blouse to go with that skirt

and then you will get to the party and have to change to the outfit in your purse
 because that blouse does not go with skirt
 so you will begin to walk with your ankles scribbling notes to god with each step
 you will need to sleep with the light on every night
 to chase the murderers away
 but eventually
 you will need a grave site with your name on it
 to remember how important it is to live
 you will interrupt sex for a phone call
 you will
 have cuts from childhood that still burn your arm
 and you will spend all your time trying to borrow back the rain
 to forget the fire

still you will trust the grainy smiles of the stars
 trust those men grooming themselves into war
 your tears will become poor dots on the skyline
 and then tomorrow
 when the sun comes out
 you will drum up your sweater
 to reveal your stomach to the sun
 and forget that you once begged on your stomach
 crawled on your own ashes
 you sunburn so beautifully

AFTER SEX

How does the body truly look after sex? Does it shimmer. Does it shine. Does it grimace. Does it roar. We all know how the body looks during sex, pummeling, working and exercising its bones. One person on top of another like two collapsed stars or buildings. But after sex. How does the body look? Does the body grimace painfully? Or is the body just a pile of exquisite sunshine. I'm worried about it. I'm worried about my cuticles, my armpits, my leg hair and my veins. Every part of me. Will my armpit hair feel less hairy afterward for some reason? Will my leg hair slowly start to fall off? Tell me what the body truly looks like and perhaps I will start having sex more often then. Maybe I will actually do it this weekend with you instead of fake reading my psychology textbook and claiming I have a headache. Maybe I will actually proceed with the visit of your body on top of mine. Maybe I will actually say yes.

YOU ARE THE FIRST MAN

I've met
whose father
is still alive

so let's do it
on the floor
we don't need

pillows
or sunshine
coming

through the curtains
or let's do it
on top

of a mountain
we can write notes
to ourselves

from God
and hide them
in each other's

pockets
how about doing it
in the bathroom closet

next to the cough syrup
and laxatives
perhaps

as you undress
my blood
you will remind me

a body is made
more than just
for mourning

STORYTELLING TO THE BEES

I have the urge to ask my mother how she is doing
But I won't waste time with duties of the heart such nonsense

I am too busy categorizing every type of rage
how long it hangs around my body

her every curve
is an eruption

she is bleeding out my bloom
I feel her weight in my skin

that scar she gave me
so, I always have something to play with

she said don't blame me if I'm a little backwards after I take my sleeping pills
if I talk to myself and then pass out on the kitchen counter

after she has faked her apology to me
curled back and died

she will laugh so that dust comes up her nose
maybe I will only be at the funeral for the cake

storytelling to the bees
about the time when she made me

carry dreams and dandelions to fire
to watch everything ripe with god
burn

BEARD TRIMS IN HEAVEN

It is a scientific fact that God gives angels beard trims in heaven. That's what my father always told me. Until I decided heaven didn't exist and God was just an invention. It was okay to be agnostic and claim you believed in "some sort of a higher power" but never to be exactly sure what. You could talk about the "juxtaposition" between science and religion over coffee. And claim you were searching for a "spiritual practice" during yoga.

But I knew exactly to whom I was praying and why. There was not "some sort" of a higher power. There was just one. In the Jewish section of Brooklyn where I grew up, God was injected into casual conversation with the same frequency my college friends used the word "juxtaposition." We went to synagogue every Saturday, kept kosher, prayed. When we couldn't find our cat, struggled to pay bills, or got angry at our mother, we prayed to God to fix it. But we did not call Him God. We knew that God was bigger than any name we could give him. God could not be summarized. We called Him *Ha-shem*, which means "The Name."

In college I still felt his breath at my back. I could not shake it. I turned up my nose at bacon, said a bracha on all my food and the first question out of my mouth to everyone I met at college was always, "Are you Jewish?" We weren't supposed to pray anymore before a test or after a death. We were supposed to meditate and use "calming breaths." A girl with blue hair and five earrings in her right ear caught me praying once after class and asked me what I was doing. When I said "praying," she whispered, "What does God feel like?"

He feels heavy. He's so stuffed with the dead's souls, our pain and anguish. He cries more than you or I do. I know this for certain because God lived in our half of the sky. Sometimes, the buildings leaned to one side with His weight. Today, the buildings in Brooklyn all look like they might fall. My father just died. And I want to say that he's getting his

beard trimmed in heaven now. Sitting in the barber's chair and waiting for God to come out with some talcum powder and razors. God will talk to my father about the weather and what he did after work last weekend. God will get the scissors and begin the cut.

I'M CONVINCED: WAR IS A POPULAR ACTIVITY

When the IRS is going to audit
 your taxes
 When your husband
 is going to leave you for another man
 When you can't find your cat
 because it drowned in the sewer
 When your brother
 did not show up to his own wedding

War is a popular thing to do
 When nothing else works out

Get into a war with the woman
 who does not move
 Her shopping cart
 fast enough through the store
 Get into a war with the sky
 When
 your heart hurls itself to the moon
 And gets swallowed
 by the sun the next morning
 Get into
 a war with your professor
 About
 trickle-down economics
 Get into a war
 with your hairdresser
 about the best hairstyle for oval-faced women

Your dreams are a broken record
 And a quarter pound of fish
 Rotting out in the open
 Let them rot

When your mother calls your aunt
who calls your sister to tell them you miscarried the baby
When you think you saw an angel hanging out in front of your doorstep
And it is just a neighborhood kid
When all of heaven comes down
And it is just a square foot of fabric in the Himalayas
When you find out that *Grease* the movie
is not actually your favorite musical of all the time
When everyone you know is in psych wards with
odd visiting hours and weird things you can't bring in

When nothing else works out

Go to war with the homeless man who does not use signs to beg for money
Go to war with the bus seats that are not made big enough
Go to war with your dead father who
Got to die
And did not have to see this.

IN RESPONSE TO “POOR PEOPLE DON’T DO ANYTHING”

Poor people wipe their own asses (damn right, I wipe my own ass) and poor people do squats while waiting for the train and poor people cry and talk to themselves (yes, I talk to myself) when it is just the right amount of dark outside and poor people play jump rope and hopscotch and hopscotch sometimes over love and poor people pray and they pray and they pray. They do a lot of things. So many things I am losing count of how many things they do. And poor people grow unibrows and poor people do acrobatics while waiting for their dinner to cook (how do you like my backflip?) and poor people meditate sometimes on life and sometimes on how good a piece of cheese sounds right now and poor people wait for the city bus and cry and they cry and they cry. Poor people do a lot of things. So many things I am losing count of how many things they do. And poor people buy ice cream for their children and poor people sigh big whole-hearted sighs, not little sighs you can barely hear. (No little sighs here.) And poor people scream and make out when they are supposed to be doing the dishes. And poor people love. And poor people swear after they have finished kissing. So Sad that the kiss is over.

TO THE RICH GIRL IN MY CLASS

I write for her breasts. I write for understanding her. I wanted anything from her. Anything I could somehow leave my mark on. My taste on. I wanted to own her like I owned my porch lights. Those things we turned on with our teeth on our first night together. But I need more than mouth, more than tonsils to get to her. Girl, voice me my bread back. Let me wear me out with your smoke. I could almost feed on her lungs if anyone gave me a chance. I don't need a coming out party. I want her screaming little puddles of steam.

Tell me forever. Forever is like a grapefruit. Hard and round. Forever sits at the bottom of our chest and peels our slow moments of breath red and feverish. At the end of all this, I wish she'd call me the plainest spoken of the angels while I pencil in her thighs with my hands. She knows I love her clean knees and just the ways she breathes. I hope she did not breathe too deeply the poverty under my armpits. Listen, I wash my body for so long, and I can still smell it. I know that there are some skins we would prefer not to own and girl, I hope mine is not one of them because I so need to bleed in your direction.

THE APPOINTMENT EPIDEMIC

First, there's the appointment with Student Disability Services where they give me a form for accommodations to take to my doctor. This results in another appointment for the doctor to fill out the form which turns into another appointment with disability services to discuss the status of the form. And if I am approved for accommodations, I am given another form for accommodations which is bright pink and yet says "confidential." I am then instructed to give that form to the instructor and explain my accommodations, and then, if I follow the process of appointments, I am accommodated. When the next semester comes, I will make another appointment with the disability office to get the bright forms again and then make another appointment to discuss the forms with my new instructor. And this cycle shall continue for all my college career. Of course, having these appointments does not start with college. The appointments start much younger. And the office was over-crowded with Russian women in low-cut tops). When I finally was seen at the first appointment, he did an intake of my sleep habits which were "terrible" he decided and resulted in the second appointment known as the overnight and daytime sleep study. Until I got to the third appointment where I was diagnosed with narcolepsy. Narcolepsy sounds like a weird exotic dancer's name or a disease you never heard of. Like narcotics and epilepsy had a one-night stand and made a baby. The neurological sleep disorder is quite rare, and we have no ribbons. No buttons. No marches (probably because we would all fall asleep). My doctor told me, the cells that produce hypocretin in my brain have died and I enter REM sleep too quickly at night, so I have vivid dreams and bad sleep. This results in excessive daytime sleepiness and sometimes paralysis with strong emotions called cataplexy. And the only medications they offer are stimulants. Sometimes I want to tell people about my disability. Why I'm falling asleep at their late-afternoon brunch at 2. I dare to utter her name. *Narcolepsy*. But whenever I say it and then explain it, the people organizing the brunch just says, "oh I'm tired too." But your tired is not my tired. My tired is a sexy tired. My tired comes to the black and white affair in a red dress. And makes me take her home. And every time. I take her. Home.

POEM FOR THE HIPPIE MAN I WAS IN LOVE WITH

I'm sorry I don't like hiking and that I don't want to go with you into the woods for ten days or sit in a wigwam or eat tons of salad or love fruit flies. I'm sorry my chakras aren't aligned. that I don't like fruit. That I swear too much. That I don't believe in "energy" or know what "energy" is. That I remember fists. That all I have is this That all I have is this. That I'm not some blond lady walking around who does yoga every morning. Who lets her feet touch the soil. That I curse with my toes. That I scream. That I plot the assassination of stars. That I can't sit still for ten minutes. That in ten minutes everything might have been gone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the inconvenience. That I couldn't find my heart beat anywhere. Not under the stairs. That I didn't want god. I needed him. His spit. To lacerate something inside. That I didn't ask to be broken like this. I just was. I remember fists pumped and the soldiering on. Death is ten times faster than breath. I can remember what that shelter smelled like. What the colors looked like, that was the most colorful place I had ever been in. I'm doing well baby. I'm doing well for a girl broken from every angle.

I remember my feet how they were forced to dance despite themselves. And I'm sorry I could not afford dance class. Did not dance because I want positive energy. Or to be closer to the soil. Or any of that bullshit. Danced to keep warm. Danced because someone told me I had to keep my legs moving or I would forget how to walk. I was dancing. Dancing not in front of the picket fences or in front of the mirrors. No studios. Just the street. Dance to reason with god. Bargain. Have him strike me a deal between my toes and the earth. There must be something he could do about my feet. I danced. My own blood in my arms. When hope came to my door I did not recognize her. She had grown so old and gained too much weight. Maybe you don't like them too strong. Eating vegetables is more your style. Baby I'm doing well. Grinning. I'm hardly armor though. Hardly soft. Hardly these thighs. These elbows. These eyes. Baby, do I got to remind you. You are mine. I didn't ask to be broken I just was.

IT HAS GOT TO BE THE HAIR

I'll take hair down the butt
 or parted to the left side
 or all thrown up in the ponytail
 a dirty
 drinking
 man
 who will steal me in an unmarked car because he is still on probation
 they will speak me
 drumming up a dream
 it has got to be the hair.
 got to be the hair
 corrupt the sidewalk
 molest the moonlight
 the dismembered sorrow of a generation
 in that hair
 a hoard of angels
 in that hair
 you make my body a house for the living now
 so I'll let you rest there
 laughing at me while I look for my bra afterward
 he is polite
 he doesn't ask me for a drink
 which sometimes I have and most of the time I don't
 I'm showering on the left side
 of my body since my
 right side
 was so next to you
 the whole time
 while he did his extra pills
 that makes him beg for houses to be knocked down
 and for him to be in them
 found all curled up inside his hair
 the chosen way to die.

POEM TO MY CHILD

That gritty
That real
That broken into your morning armor for love
A war inside your chest
you should move like a being across the sky
your laugh is unfolding sunrise
and you smell like something I want to find out
you are that scar across my body burning bright
your laughter your stench your music
history without the bone
I would make sure you always get drunk off god
and that you liked the way your thigh bone hits your pelvis
when it is time for you to stretch your long legs out
mark off your territory with your fists
bite down on your freedom just like this
just like this
no milling your bruises for spotlights
you found the remedy for thunder in your eyes
your dreams get wary of your lungs
because of how deeply you breathe.

THIS IS FOR AFTER

Mother is all uncoiling
a prophet

hair standing up
left fist clenched

body
endless

red face
foaming

mouth

The kitchen table
survived

The kitchen table
survived.

The vase never used
for flowers
fell first and then

the fake gold lamp
a dirty dish
three glasses

a slice of cucumber
She is looking

for our veins to stuff
her rage inside

The kitchen table
survived

Father, brother, and I
can still talk about crackers

and creation
and how much Mother needs
to cut her nails

and Father
bleeds so much

partly because of her nails
and partly because
he just stood there
believing her right
to what order
parts of him are allowed
to die

The kitchen table
survived
so, we can still talk

about what we will make
of Father afterwards

DEAR MOM,

You never taught me how to clean a toilet bowl
or wax my eyebrows
or from which side I should start brushing my teeth.
You never lingered your hands longer
in your hug than you had to.
that when the sunrise came
you dreamed about leaping off the fire escape
with the moon's stench on you.

Everything on you looks shaky
no color
no red
no purple
will bring out your eyes.
You never taught me what skirt
will hide my bumpy knees
But while I lingered in your loins
you said
pray, beautiful

I will not be able to help you learn how to walk.
so, this is how a daughter
was taught to pray.

STUTTERING FOR THE MOTHERS

so, bless her
 give her away
 to the mental hospitals
 and once
 I rode in the ambulance
 watching her skin sweat off the pale
 it takes determination to be beautiful
 because even when she frequents the soup kitchen
 she must do it wearing all her jewelry
 and tell me over and over again how good the soup is
 now she is priming for her disposal
 with her dehydrated heart

she is on the stretcher
 wishing she could be grazing the streetlamps with her toes
 her feet
 pressure the sky for milk
 she calculates her amount of calluses
 from trying to rub out a freedom
 just write to the rupture in her heart beat
 she's casually paranoid
 cursing out shadows
 while eating breakfast
 but we are
 already stuttering
 into new breathing

my young hands shake soundly with age
 twenty-one was not such a good idea for me
 I get her water
 and a holistic fix of silence and wandering
 my elbows propped against her bed
 not yet praying but in good prayer formation
 I want for the first time to
 walk together down the narrow hallway
 till we get to the edge of her sorrow
 and smudge a fresh skyline.